

BUSINESS METHOD FOR INDICIA WITH SANITARY BEVERAGE CAN

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

This application is a continuation of provisional application serial No. 60/155,574, filed September 24, 1999.

1. Field of the Invention

This invention relates to the field of indicia in combination with sanitized and protected beverage cans or containers such are used to contain and consume soda, beer and juice. More specifically, it relates to a business method employing a protective member having revenue producing indicia on beverage containers which have been sanitized and protected from contamination after sanitization. The apparatus is a consumer removed, flexible, mouth contact area protective member adhered to the container, in which the protective member is combined with indicia that may be replaceable, paid, third party advertising, promotion, games of chance, premiums, collectibles, redeemables, merchandise acquisition means, and prizes, as well as such things as public service announcements, instructional information, and warnings.

The method contemplates sanitization of at least the portion of the container that comes in contact with a consumer's mouth, adhering a protective member to the container, which member covers the mouth contact area on the top, rim and side of the container, adherence of the protective member to the container during shipment, distribution, storage, sale, and consumer transportation of the container and at least partial removal of the protective member by the consumer during opening of the container. It also

contemplates the sale of the above described types of indicia, the application, such as by printing, of same on the protective members, and the collection of money from such third parties in what may ^{be} viewed as a new business method.

2. Description of Prior Art

Today's society is well acquainted with the so called "pop top" aluminum can which doubles both as a pressurized beverage container and drinking device. Also in common use are the usually small "tin" peel strip cans, frequently containing fruit juices which are not pressurized, contain an aperture at the top for beverage consumption, and include a tightly adhered plastic strip which is removed for consumption of the beverage.

While the pop top can and peel strip cans are sometimes used with cups as the beverage consuming medium, they are designed and are perhaps much more frequently used as a beverage consuming container. Position of the container aperture is designed to facilitate convenient consumption directly from the container because the aperture is disposed near but not right at the rim of the top thereof.

Manufacture of these containers and the filing of same with a beverage and sealing thereof is well known to be done by highly automated machinery under what are assumed to be sanitary conditions. Nevertheless, in this age of greatly expanded scientific knowledge and heightened health consciousness, it seems

incongruous to rely upon an assumption that such containers are safe to use as a beverage consuming container. That is particularly so since the overwhelming majority of the time that such beverage containers are also used as a consumption device, there is no means readily available to sanitize such containers before they are used for consumption, and there are certainly no means available to assure that they are safe for that purpose.

There has been a certain amount of inventive activity focused on this concern. For example, Howard, U. S. Patent No. 4,927,048 discloses a protective covering for the closure of a beverage can. It constitutes an aluminum foil which is glued to the can and has a tear away access strip to expose the pouring aperture. This access strip remains attached to the protective covering even after it has been torn to expose the pouring aperture.

Similarly, Cho, U. S. Patent No. 5,813,559 discloses a beverage can having a sanitary covering rotatively attached to the top of the can by a rivet. The covering includes the lip portion of the rim nearest opening cover of the can during storage.

Another reference of interest is Chang, et al., U. S. Patent No. 5,813,561. This invention includes a can lid having a center platform where the pull tab is raised from below the rim of a can to a position above the rim and wherein the center platform diameter is reduced in diameter to provide additional space from the exterior of the can body to the edge of the platform. The raised center platform prevents the user's lip from coming in contact with the groove along the edge of the lid, wherein it is

alleged that dirt may accumulate.

A further reference, is Granofsky, U. S. Patent No. 5,119,955 which discloses a closure device in which a principal focus concerns resealing the can using a reinsertable plug portion when less than the entire contents of the container are consumed. It includes an integral plastic member extending around the upper end portion of the can including the sidewall and end wall thereof.

Another reference is Granofsky, U. S. Patent No. 5,108,003 which is similar to the preceding reference but includes a flexible member in a severable strip along its lower edge allowing the cover to be peeled back to allow for opening of the container. Half the cover can be folded away while the remainder remains adhesively secure to the container.

One more interesting reference is that of Eberhart, U. S. Patent No. 4,749,100 which is a snap on lid type of device removably attached to the upper marginal lip of a beverage can covering the top surface to prevent the entry of dirt prior to the use of the can.

Finally, there is the disclosure of Hammond, U.S. Patent No. 5,014,869 which concerns a can sealing organization involving a plurality of beverage containers. Each cap number is heat sealed in circumferential relationship to the top of each container, and each cap member includes an antiseptically saturated sponge mounted beneath the cap and containing a rupturable antibacterial fluid for use at the appropriate time.

It is noted, however, that none of these references appear to

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adequately take into consideration the fact that a beverage container, when used as consumption means, requires more than concern for the sanitation of its lid and very upper sidewall. It is easy to recognize that the inside of the lower lip is held against the sidewall of the beverage can when the same is used for consumption. The foregoing references utterly fail to address the concern that the inside of the consumer's mouth comes in direct contact with the exterior sidewall of the container. Therefore, the prior art does not adequately deal with the sanitation issue of the sidewall of a beverage container, leaving the consumer to rely solely upon the initially mentioned assumption for safety.

At the same time, a new trend in the advertising industry has been to develop new and innovative sites for the placement of revenue producing advertising. An outstanding example of this has been the placement of removable and replaceable third party paid advertising inside of golf holes. In the context of this invention, the term "third party" advertisement contemplates an arms length advertiser that is ordinarily neither the supplier of the invention nor the beverage seller on which the invention is employed, although neither is precluded.

Typical of this type of technology are a number of issued U.S. ^{40/660} patents. Examples are Boudreau, U.S. patent no. 4,928,417, Boudreau, et al., U.S. patent no. 4,878,665, Dark, U.S. patent no. ^{473/176} _{40/660} 5,249,384, Hannon, U.S. patent no. 5,190,283, Hageman, U.S. patent no. 5,362,044, and Mabie, U.S. patent no. 5,788,581. So far as is presently known, there are no issued patents teaching the provision

of a device for the sanitization and subsequent protection of the entire mouth contact area of a beverage container using a mouth contact area protective member, and almost certainly there are no patents on the placement of removable and replaceable third party paid advertising on such a beverage container protective member. Of course the same thing is almost certainly true concerning the other types of indicia described above, such as promotion, games of chance, premiums, collectibles, redeemables, merchandise acquisition means, and prizes, as well as such things as public service announcements, instructional information, and warnings.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

Bearing in mind the foregoing, it is a principal object of the present invention to provide a business method and enabling apparatus whereby beverage containers may be sanitized and protected from contamination after sanitization by employing a consumer removed, flexible, mouth contact area protective member, which member also provides the site of replaceable, paid, third party indicia.

Another principal object of the invention is to provide the consuming public with a visible structure that provides assurance that the beverage in question has been the subject of sanitization and protection during container filling, shipment, distribution, storage, sale, consumer transportation and opening, while at the same time providing a revenue stream from replaceable, paid, third party indicia to offset the cost of the invention or to produce a

profit as a separate business.

OK An additional object of the invention is to provide a method which contemplates sanitization of a beverage container, attachment of protective member to the container, which member covers the mouth contact area on the top, rim and side of the container, adherence of the protective member to the container during shipment, distribution, storage, sale, and consumer transportation of the container, at least partial removal of the protective member by the consumer during opening of the container, as well as the selling, printing and distribution of indicia in a new medium.

Another object of the invention is to provide a mouth contact area protective member which is readily employed by the consumer, easily removed, and does not interfere with consumption of the beverage, and a new business revenue source from paid indicia from a third party.

A variation of the preceding object of the invention is to imprint the protective member with indicia, such as that which may tout the advantages and safety of the invention, or which may be numbered for promotions or premiums, or which may include public service announcements, instructional information, warnings and the like.

gf A related object of the invention is to employ this imprinted indicia as *an* a medium that is contemplated to produce a revenue stream from third parties such that the costs of the invention are at least in part paid by such third parties, or more beneficially, a new business yielding separate profits from such indicia is

achieved.

It is another object of the present invention to provide a site for replaceable third party paid indicia in combination with an apparatus and method whereby beverage containers may be sanitized and protected from contamination after sanitization by employing a consumer removed, flexible, mouth contact area protective member, with that member being the indicia site.

A further object of the invention is to provide a mouth contact area protective member which is optionally reattachable to the mouth contact area of the beverage container in the event that the entire contents thereof are not consumed all at the same time.

Another object of the invention is to overcome the deficiencies of the prior art by providing sanitation protection not only of the top of the beverage container but of an adequate portion of the sidewall in proximity to the aperture thereof when opened.

A further object of the invention is to provide sanitation protection that is usable with any container that is used for mouth contacting consumption of a beverage or other food product, including conventional containers that do not have either a pull tab or peel strip opener, such as old fashioned beer cans that require a separate top piercing opener.

An additional object of the invention is to provide sanitation protection that includes sufficient bearing strength to avoid having its efficacy impaired by stacking of a considerable number of beverage containers on top of each other, as commonly occurs

when "six packs" are stacked directly on top of other six packs to a considerable depth, greatly increasing the weight to be borne by the six pack on the bottom of the stack.

A further related object of the invention is to provide sanitation protection that is usable with any containers that are held together in a six pack or similar configuration by a deformable cluster of interconnected plastic rings placed at the necks of the containers.

Still another object of the invention is to provide an apparatus and method of use that is the essence of simplicity.

A related object of the invention is to employ an apparatus and method to achieve the foregoing objectives in a manner which adds no significant costs to the packaging of the beverage so that health and sanitation concerns are addressed without any significant effect on pricing of the product, or which produces revenue to offset the cost of the invention, pay for it in its entirety, or which spins off sufficient revenue to be a separate, new and profitable business.

Other objects and advantages will be apparent to those skilled in the art upon reference to the following descriptions and the accompanying drawings.

In accordance with a primary aspect of the invention, there is provided a new business method that employs an indicia mouth contact area protective member for use in combination with a sanitized beverage container, which member comprises primarily a substantially hourglass shaped piece of thin material or film of

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suitable dimension which is adhered to the mouth contact area of beverage containers. Alternatively, a substantially circular member may be used, in which event the member is applied within the rim of the top of the container. The hourglass shape has been found to permit adherence to the top and convex side of a container without deformation of the protective member's material, and without wrinkling. This is important to avoid air pockets or bubbles, which could become sites for bacterial contamination.

The preferred embodiment of the material is a co-extruded plastic material comprised of a base of linear, low density polyethylene, mixed with a twenty percent (20%) addition of ethylene vinyl acetate. This specific combination gives the material the required stiffness for it to be dispensed from a high speed label basket (in which thousands of the contact area protective members are tightly stacked) while retaining enough softness and suppleness to precisely conform under the application pressure, in a skin tight manner, to the contours of a beverage can. The protective member is preferably manufactured in a unique shape that allows it to be folded over the rim of the beverage can, creating the protection for the lower lip area, without any wrinkling of the material under the application pressure.

In addition to the preferred embodiment of the formulation, the material is preferably treated in a specific manner. First, it receives an anti-static chemical treatment such that each one of the protective members will slide easily from the adjoining member and not cling to it under high speed dispensing. Second, the

material undergoes a second chemical treatment to insure that the adhesive that is added during the application procedure will bond to the plastic and not to the metal of the beverage can top. This is for the purpose of having a completely clean removal of the protective member and its adhesive without any adhesive residue left on the can itself. Third, since the protective members will usually have indicia applied to them, and this is normally applied by printing, the film of the protective member must be treated to accept and retain printing ink. This treatment is normally an electronic process referred as carona discharge.

The member further includes a protective member tab, which may be of an increased thickness that will be easy for the consumer to grasp and which is preferably disposed at the lowest point of the member on the sidewall portion of the mouth contact area on the beverage container when the member is hourglass shaped. If the round shape is employed, the tab is at any point around the rim of the container. Optionally also included is a re-adherence capability to permit reattachment of the member to the beverage container to accommodate reuse of the member in the event that the entire contents of the container are not all consumed at one time. The indicia will be marketed and sold to third parties usually unrelated to either the supplier of the invention or the beverage.

In accordance with a further aspect of the present invention, there is disclosed a method for selling third party paid indicia, and placement of same on a member used in the protection scheme of the invention. Also included is sanitizing by any convenient

method a portion of a beverage container referred to herein as the mouth contact area, including most specifically the top and often also the adjoining sidewall thereof and using a mouth contact area covering or protective member preferably fabricated from the above described material. It is this protective member that provides the situs for the indicia.

The material in question includes container adherence characteristics which is preferably the result of an adhesive additive. The adhesive will preferably be of antibacterial character. The method further contemplates the packaging, distribution, storage, sale, consumer transportation and opening of the beverage container in a manner designed to avoid compromising the protections afforded by the protective member such that the consumer can be assured that the sanitation benefits are in no way degraded between the time that the sanitation is achieved and the consumption of the beverage.

In accordance with a further aspect of the invention, the indicia may be in the nature of "under lid" promotions. This is uniquely achieved by printing on the underside of the protective member, which may be substantially transparent to reveal the printing, or is preferably opaque so that the protective member must be removed to reveal what is there. The latter approach is particularly well suited for games and promotions, in the manner of a scratch off lottery ticket. It is expected that the protective members can be collected and redeemed for merchandise, premiums or prizes. The protective members thus are turned into a truly

interactive marketing tool, not just an indicia "billboard." Indeed, this concept actually is the genesis of a completely new business method--a revolutionary new way of doing business that generates a previously unknown revenue stream that benefits all who come in contact with it. It benefits the consumer in several ways, it benefits the beverage company in several ways, it benefits the advertiser or promoter, it benefits the manufacturer of the protective members, and finally it benefits the creator of the concept.

A better understanding of the invention may be achieved by reference to the drawings in which:

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF DRAWINGS

Figure 1 is a perspective view of the inventive member shown in combination with a beverage container prior to use thereof and indicating the site of the indicia.

Figure 2 shows one embodiment of the member of figure 1 prior to its application to the beverage container and showing the site of the indicia.

Figure 3 shows the member and beverage container of figure 1 after the beverage container has been opened and member drawn back for consumption of the beverage.

Figure 4 is a top plan view of the preferred embodiment of the protective member prior to application to the beverage container and showing its unique and highly significant hourglass shape.

Figure 5 is a top plan view of the alternative embodiment of the protective member prior to application to the beverage container and showing its round container top conforming shape.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

As required, detailed embodiments of the present invention are disclosed herein; however, it is to be understood that the disclosed embodiments are merely exemplary of the invention which may be embodied in various forms. Therefore, specific structural and functional details disclosed herein are not to be interpreted as limiting, but merely as a basis for the claims and as a representative basis for teaching one skilled in the art to variously employ the present invention in virtually any appropriate detailed structure and associated method.

References now made to the drawings which illustrate the method enabling apparatus, and wherein like characteristics and features of the present invention shown in the various figures are designated by the same reference numerals.

Referring to figures 1-5 a beverage container 10 comprising a top 12, a sidewall 14, neck 15 and a bottom 16 is seen. The sidewall 14, neck 15, and bottom 16 are sometimes of one piece aluminum that is deeply drawn, but almost invariably the top 12 and

sidewall 14 are crimped at circumferential rim 18. Some beverage containers include a separate bottom 16 and sidewall 14 joined together at a circumferential rim 18'. Also shown in an eccentric position of the top 12 is a pull tab opener 20 which alternatively may be of pull strip opener or other opening means (not shown). Adjoining the same is the sealed aperture 22.

In combination therewith is the inventive mouth contact area protective member 24 shown in adherence to beverage container 10 and overlapping the sealed aperture 22 as well as sidewall 14 in the mouth contact area 26 of the beverage container 10. Also seen is protective member tab 28 disposed at the lowest point of the sidewall 14 of container 10. It will be seen that protective member tab 28 is at least partially erect from the sidewall 14 of beverage container 10 to make it easy for the user to grasp the same and strip back the protective member 24. Also shown is the site of indicia which is preferably replaceable, paid, third party indicia 36.

The preferred embodiment of the material from which protective member 24 is made is a co-extruded plastic material comprised of a base of linear, low density polyethylene, mixed with a twenty percent (20%) addition of ethylene vinyl acetate. This specific combination gives the material the required stiffness for it to be dispensed from a high speed label basket (in which thousands of the contact area protective members are tightly stacked) while retaining enough softness and suppleness to precisely conform under the application pressure, in a skin tight manner, to the contours

of a beverage can. The protective member is preferably manufactured in a unique hourglass shape that allows it to be folded over the rim of the beverage can, creating the protection for the lower lip area, without any wrinkling of the material under the application pressure.

In addition to the preferred embodiment of the formulation, the material is preferably treated in a specific manner. First, it receives an anti-static chemical treatment such that each one of the protective members will slide easily from the adjoining member and not cling to it under high speed dispensing. Second, the material undergoes a second chemical treatment to insure that the preferably antibacterial adhesive that is added during the application procedure will bond to the plastic and not to the metal of the beverage can top. This is for the purpose of having a completely clean removal of the protective member and its antibacterial adhesive without any adhesive residue left on the can itself. Third, since the protective members will usually have indicia applied to them, and this is normally applied by printing, the film of the protective member must be treated to accept and retain printing ink. This treatment is normally an electronic process referred as carona discharge.

Turning to figure 2, there is disclosed the reason that the hourglass shape is so important to the protective member 24. Figure 2 shows how the hourglass shape fits around the complex shape of the junction of a planar surface, the top 12, and a convex surface, the sidewall 14 and neck 15, at a raised rim 18, and still

not wrinkle. It illustrates in this perspective view its convex shape accommodating characteristic 30. It is understood and recognized that although the protective member 24 is a substantially planar material, adherence to the top 12, rim 18, sidewall 14 and neck 15 of beverage container 10 (as seen in figure 1) is achieved without wrinkling because of the hourglass shape. Replaceable, paid, third party indicia 36 can also be seen.

Noted in the objects of the invention is the notion of fabricating the protective member 24 from a print receptive substance so that the member may be imprinted with indicia 36. Among the benefits are messages which may tout the advantages and safety of the invention, which may be numbered for promotions or premiums, and/or as an indicia medium. The latter is contemplated to produce a revenue stream from third parties such that the costs of the invention are at least in part paid by such third parties, or more beneficially, a new business yielding separate profits from such indicia is achieved. The protective member 24 thereby provides a site for replaceable third party paid indicia 36 in combination with an apparatus and method whereby beverage containers may be sanitized and protected from contamination after sanitization by employing a consumer removed, flexible, mouth contact area protective member.

In figure 3, it will be seen that protective member 24 has been stripped upward and backward in proximity to the erect hand of pull tab opener 20. The pull tab opener 20 results in the covering to aperture 22 being depressed within beverage container

10 leaving the opening from which the beverage may be consumed.

Figure 4 shows the substantially hourglass shape 38 in which the waist 40 is the key to the ability to have a substantially planar surface conform without wrinkling to the intersection of planar and convex surfaces along sidewall 14, neck 15 and raised rim 18.

Turning finally to figure 5, the alternative embodiment of the protective member is seen with a substantially circular shape and having a tab at any point along its periphery.

While the invention has been described, disclosed, illustrated and shown in various terms or certain embodiments or modifications which it has assumed in practice, the scope of the invention is not intended to be, nor should it be deemed to be, limited thereby and such other modifications or embodiments as may be suggested by the teachings herein are particularly reserved especially as the fall within the breadth and scope of claims appended hereto.